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CZECH IMMIGRANTS PAY COST OF FREEDOM

By Janice Downey
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Igor Suchomel and his wife, Yveta, live in a small apartment close to downtown Missoula. Near the door, a hefty bricks-and-boards bookcase supports volumes by Joseph Brodsky, Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera and several underground Czech writers. On a living-room wall adjoining the kitchenette, a "Solidarity" button is pinned to a macrame hanging.

Igor's black-and-white photography and a color calendar shot of his hometown, Brno, Czechoslovakia, stand out on the walls that flank two long windows. Beneath the windows is a couch that the Suchomels found in an alley. Other living room furnishings include a sitting chair, a coffee table, a kitchen table and a chest freezer.

"If I had stayed in Czechoslovakia and had entered the Communist Party, I could be living a lot better than I do now in Missoula," says Igor, a 1987 UM graduate who escaped Communist rule in Czechoslovakia almost five years ago. "But I wouldn't be able to read the books I want."

Freedom for Igor, 29, his 26-year-old wife, Yveta, and their future children was the main reason the Suchomels fled Brno, one of Czechoslovakia's largest cities.

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"I couldn't imagine raising a family there," says Igor. "To put your own kids through such brainwashing is amazing to me."

A legal resident of the United States, Igor enjoys constitutional freedoms and often speaks out about both governments he's been under. But the Suchomels' road to freedom has been a long one, and it hasn't ended yet.

Their flight began when Igor criticized the Czech government, installed in 1968 with the help of the Soviet and four Warsaw Pact armies.

"I didn't like the regime," he said. "I considered it a foreign regime that's destroying Czechoslovakia."

In winter 1983 the Socialists Union of Youths hired Igor, not a Communist, as a translator for a group of British and West German students visiting Czechoslovakia. To learn how to answer the Westerners' questions, he had to attend a special school.

"They wanted me to show them only the good parts of Czechoslovakia," he said. "But when the students came, I did the opposite. I took them to the railroad station, which is heated in the winter, and showed them the homeless and elderly on pensions staying there.

"And I showed them the workers at a pub at 10 in the morning. You see, there's an old Czech saying: 'They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work.'"

When he was a senior in geography at the University of J. E. Purkyne in Brno, Igor was expelled from the university for

criticizing the government. He began considering defection.

The only Czechs allowed to travel are those in the Communist Party or those working their way into the party, he explained. So by playing the party's game and lying for six months, he said, he got a travel permit to vacation in Yugoslavia in summer 1983. The government denied permission for his fiancee, Yveta, to go with him to Yugoslavia.

There he rendezvoused with his brother, Ales, and the two climbed the mountains into Austria. They spent six months there in a refugee camp and were granted permanent residency in the U.S. At the Austrian refugee camp, Ales studied botany, and Igor studied U.S. geography books to select his new home.

"Montana seemed the most favorable to me in terms of population, nature and landscape," Igor said.

Instead of coming directly to Montana after their arrival in New York City, the Suchomel brothers went to Houston for six months where they worked odd jobs and saved enough money to buy a car. They stayed with third-generation Czech-Americans.

"That was a bad experience," Igor said. "They were old people, uneducated, and they just wanted us to work in a factory. They couldn't understand why I wanted to finish my education in a university."

Soon after Igor left Czechoslovakia, Yveta -- not yet his wife -- filed an official complaint for not being allowed to vacation in Yugoslavia. Czech government agents began following

Yveta and questioned her once a week until she agreed to drop the complaint.

"I was really scared," Yveta said. "I felt like I was in prison because I wasn't able to move anywhere. I felt when I was in the rooms where they asked questions, I didn't know what they [would] do to me. They told me some people said I wanted to defect. I told them, `No, not true.'"

"If we had been married then, it probably would be impossible to get her out [of Czechoslovakia] without some intervention of the U.S. Congress or something," Igor said. "She would be held there as a hostage."

With the help of friends who forged documents and bribed officials, she was en route to Cuba -- on a $4,000 round-trip ticket -- eight months after Igor left Czechoslolvakia. She got out of the plane in Montreal when the plane stopped for refueling. There she was detained for three days at a former motel used as an immigrants' center, where she caught hepatitis, a liver disease.

Yveta and Igor were married June 1, 1984, in a small Catholic chapel in Montreal. They didn't know the priest or their witnesses, but they hoped their bond would help Yveta attain permanent residency in America. Instead, Igor returned to Houston without Yveta, who was granted a temporary visitor's visa in Canada but was not allowed in the U.S.

During her first three months in Montreal, Yveta stayed with

a distant Czech relative and his Canadian wife. Her hepatitis went untreated because she couldn't afford medical attention -- she had spent all her money on airfare -- and as a foreigner she was not eligible for government help. Her relative didn't help, Yveta said, because he figured she had a stomach ache.

"I couldn't eat and I lost weight," she said. "I couldn't walk to shop for food, and I needed some money to buy proper food."

In mid-June, her relatives left Montreal for the summer, so Yveta moved into a Czech community house run by a priest. Meanwhile, Igor applied for his wife to join him in the United States. However, U.S. immigration officials put her case in the inactive files. Nothing more happened on her case until late July.

"When I moved to the priest's house, they asked me if I can work there so they can offer me food and a place to stay," she said. "I went to work there. I helped in the kitchen. It was hard. I collapsed there.

"In the priest's house I stayed until I got my papers [granting her provisional refugee status in Canada]. Then I had my blood checked. I was in the hospital for three weeks with intravenous feeding."

Two weeks after he got married, Igor and his brother left Houston for Montana in a '65 Volkswagen Bus. Their bus broke

down in Wyoming and they had to replace its engine. It was summertime, 1984, when the Suchomel brothers arrived in Missoula.

"We came here with $50 in our pockets," Igor said.

They saw a map of Flathead Lake and heard about the cherries, so they headed for Kalispell where they hoped to find jobs.

Again, their bus broke down in Rollins, on the west shore of Flathead Lake. For six months they lived in a garage where they repaired their vehicle. They also worked construction of all kinds until they moved to Polson. There, Igor had his own tree-topping business on the south shore of Flathead Lake, and Ales worked at a restaurant.

The September after the Igor and Ales arrived in Montana, Igor returned to Canada with an American friend who helped Yveta across the border. Since the time when Yveta was released from the hospital, she was without resources and could not care for herself.

"We tried to cross the border legally the first time," Igor said. "I tried to get her a visa, but they wouldn't let her. I had called the immigration service in Helena, but I was totally frustrated. I didn't get any help at all. So I didn't know any other solution but to go there and pick her up."

"I wasn't able to walk, and I wasn't able to work," Yveta said. "I was just stuck on the border and it was an impossibility of what to do."

In December of 1984, U.S. immigration officials caught up with the Suchomels in Polson and threatened to deport Yveta for being in the U.S. illegally, and by that time, Yveta's provisional status in Canada had expired. Igor's residency status was also stripped for helping an illegal alien.

Aliens under going deportation proceedings have limited protection under the U.S. Constitution until they are granted a residency status.

"We weren't hiding," he said. "When I tried to talk to them as a legal resident, I had a right to petition for reunification of my family, and they just ignored me. When she was here, suddenly they were very interested in talking to me."

The Immigration and Naturalization Service, which declined to comment on the Suchomels' case, is made up of "the same monsters as the Communist Party," Igor said. "It seems ironic with the Statue of Liberty's, 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...' It's the same kind of propoganda as in Czechoslovakia."

The Suchomels found a lawyer, who handled their case for free and appealed their status ruling. They also persuaded their American friends to write to their Congressmen, and they circulated a petition at UM.

"I was extremely desperate," Igor said. "I realized without public attention and pressure from Congressmen, we'd be deported."

After a Congressional inquiry, Igor's status was reinstated in August 1986. The U.S. State Department confirmed that Yveta would be imprisoned if she returned to her homeland. Yveta expected to be granted permanent residency in the U.S. before spring. However, Igor says the INS said last week that it sent Yveta the wrong application form and that she will now have to leave the country to reapply for an immigrant visa.

The three Suchomels attend UM. Yveta, not yet eligible for financial aid, works part time at St. Patrick Hospital in the intensive care unit. She is a freshman majoring in pre-physical therapy. Ales is a sophomore majoring in education, and Igor is a graduate student in geography.

In comparing the two universities that he has attended, Igor said: "The University could be a little bit tougher here in forcing the students to study more in some occasions. I think students should work more for their knowledge.

"The university in Czechoslovakia is tougher. I don't know if it's better, though. You have to memorize a lot more things. You study hard and forget half of it in two weeks after a test.

"The emphasis is on memorizing than on creative thinking, which I think is a problem. ... [The professors] tell you what to learn and memorize, but you don't get into deep discussions. That's what ultimately destroys your own creative thinking."

Igor says that after he completes his graduate program, he'd like to stay in Montana, perhaps to start his own travel agency

catering to Europeans.

"One of the few things the U.S. has to offer Europeans is the nature we have here in Montana and tracts of open land," Igor said. "People would pay a lot of money just to ride a horse across the Bob Marshall [Wilderness]. For them, that would be a supreme experience."

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